

Putin: Church Should Have More Control Over Family Life

President Vladimir Putin said on Friday the Orthodox Church should be given more say over family life, education and the armed forces in Russia, as he celebrated the leadership of its head Patriarch Kirill.

Faith runs deep in Russia after the fall of the officially atheist Soviet Union and Putin has looked to the largest religion in Russia for support since he began his third term as president after a wave of protests against his rule.

He has also tried to mix spirituality with his own brand of patriotism in order to unify the officially secular country where ethnic and political fault lines are beginning to show.

"At the heart of all Russia's victories and achievements are patriotism, faith and strength of spirit," Putin said in the Kremlin's gold encrusted Alexeyevsky hall, celebrating the fourth anniversary of Kirill's accession as patriarch.

Putin's relationship with the church has strengthened since band members of protest punk band Pussy Riot entered Russia's Christ the Saviour Church last year and sang a vulgarity-laced song, urging the Virgin Mary to "throw Putin out".

Without giving specifics, Putin said a "vulgar" understanding of secularism must be swept away to give the Church, and other religions, control over more aspects of Russian life.

"While preserving the secular nature of our state, and not allowing the over-involvement of the government in Church life, we need to get away from the vulgar, primitive understanding of secularism," he said.

"The Russian Orthodox Church and other traditional religions

should get every opportunity to fully serve in such important fields as the support of family and motherhood, the upbringing and education of children, youth, social development, and to strengthen the patriotic spirit of the armed forces.”

Ethnic Tension

Putin has praised the Church’s spiritual values in their own right but he has also turned to religious understanding to counteract ethnic tension in cities such as Moscow, which have large Muslim migrant populations from the Caucasus Mountain region and Central Asia.

The Church in turn has praised Putin’s leadership. Shortly before the Pussy Riot performance, Kirill likened Putin’s time in power to a “miracle of God”.

Putin was then prime minister and in the midst of a campaign for the March 4 presidential vote.

The Church has also given its priests freer rein in politics, establishing rules for the clergy seeking elected office despite restrictions on almost all political activity by religious authorities.

The Pussy Riot performance took place at the height of a protest movement sparked by allegations of voting fraud during 2011 parliamentary elections. Holding regular protests, tens of thousands of Russians aired grievances over problems in Putin’s tightly controlled top-down political system.

Many Russians however consider leaders of that movement as out of touch with everyday problems outside of Moscow, where faith is stronger and many were insulted by the Pussy Riot performance.

The pro-Kremlin United Russia party has proposed a law introducing prison terms for offences against religious symbols and feelings of believers.

Editing by Alison Williams

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